

**Tyesha Andrews**  
**State Board of Education**  
**State Board of Education Meeting**  
**February 15, 2023**

Good evening, everyone. My name is Tyesha Andrews. I am a Native Washingtonian, Ward 8 resident, 14-year D.C. government employee, advocate, mother, & wife. I come before you today to speak about my thoughts on funding SBMH support for D.C. Public Schools, specifically schools in my ward, ward 8, and schools in wards 6 & 7, where my children attend school. I have a 13-year-old, 8th-grade son at Jefferson Middle Academy and a 6-year-old, 1st-grade son at Plummer Elementary.

Both of my sons were diagnosed, at a young age, on the spectrum of having High-Functioning Autism. As a product of D.C. public schools, I did not want my children to attend D.C. public schools, especially in our neighborhood. Therefore, I sent my oldest son to charter schools when he was younger, thinking it would be better. However, the charter elementary school system failed my oldest son. I do not believe he graduated from the charter elementary school with the skills he needed to succeed in middle school, so I pulled him out of the school and sent him to D.C. public schools. But not in my neighborhood. Due to my assistance, both of my sons have been doing very well in D.C. public schools. However, I would like all D.C. students to do well in school, and I would like D.C. public schools in ward 8 to provide the same level of education, safety, and enrichment that my children are getting in wards 6 & 7. Because I have limited time to speak, I would like to focus on my youngest son, as that experience to express is a lot shorter than that of my oldest son. With that, I'll get to the point.

It's a known fact that other countries excel in education compared to the U.S. because other countries focus on the family, whereas the U.S. focuses on numbers. The numbers then, in turn, equal money. Both parents and teachers need support from each other for each child to succeed, and city leaders are just as responsible for the lack of educational support as parents.

Mental health is and will continue to be the core focus for families and teachers to provide a successful educational experience for all students. Plummer already embodies this environment but needs additional funds and resources to succeed and go above and beyond.

The Benning Ridge neighborhood, located on the borderline of Southeast and Northeast D.C., has not had an excellent reputation over the years. There is a fair amount of crime, drugs, and loitering in the neighborhood. This area usually would incur many individuals dealing with mental health issues, and not typically a place you would send your child to learn. No wonder you would never be aware of the precious gem we call Mary H. Plummer Elementary School. Here's a short history timeline for you.

All SBMH supports vary by school, based on budget, and need. In 2021, PAVE conducted a 2021 Fall Back to School Survey, where we learned that 55 % of caregivers are unsatisfied with the mental health and social-emotional support D.C. Schools give their children with IEPs. Outside of that, the National Survey of Children reports that almost 50% of children in the U.S. have experienced "at least one type of severe

childhood trauma. \$18 million are secure for D.C. Schools for the next two fiscal years. This funding can be used to conduct a city-wide needs assessment to see what other schools need the same resources and more resources so that all D.C. Schools, including Plummer, can achieve better scores. Increased funding would ensure hiring of more mental health professionals and other staff to assist them. All schools need increased access to mental health professionals. Imagine the heights Plummer can achieve with more funding to support their SBMH.

As a parent, I had many reservations about sending my youngest to Plummer. However, Plummer has created a village that continuously exceeds my family's expectations. Plummer Elementary school has and continues to defy the odds as a small grade school with most of its students being considered low-income. Imagine the heights and academic goals the school could reach with additional funding to support the mental health needs of the Plummer Community, including students, staff, and families. Let me put everything in perspective for you.

My youngest son, Terrance Jr., is a joyful, inquisitive trickster. He loves to laugh, play, and prank. He was also diagnosed as a black boy with a high-functioning autism spectrum disorder. Terrance, Jr., or T.J. as we like to call him at home, is brilliant; at only 6 ½ years old, starting in the 1st grade Fall of 2022, he was already on mid-year, 1st-grade level for all math and at or above the level for all reading as well. He enjoys playing tee ball and video games, especially Plants Versus Zombies. He also loves to watch T.V. shows such as Pokémon, Blaze, Paw Patrol, and a host of other YouTube, Netflix, and Disney Junior shows. My son began schooling at Plummer in May 2019 at the ripe age of 3. You must be three years of age to enroll in DCPS, and his birthday is at the very end of April. He started school the first Monday after his 3rd birthday, Monday, April 29th, 2019.

When I was initially told that Plummer was the only school in the city with space for T.J. that could provide the services he needed, I was shocked, scared, and relieved all at once. I was relieved because he wasn't placed at our neighborhood school, Patterson Elementary. I was afraid because Plummer's reputation appeared to be only slightly better than Patterson's. I was shocked because I didn't know what to expect. However, our experience with Plummer has been nothing less than a beautiful experience.

It took T.J. a short while to start fully adjusting due to starting at the end of the school year, then taking a summer break before jumping back in. Despite this challenge, the teachers supported Terrance, and we started to see growth. His teachers and I communicated regularly about his developments at home and school. By building this village for T.J., he became one of the most intelligent kids in his class, even to this day. Plummer has not only supported T.J.'s academics, but they have supported my family as well as my position and action with PAVE.

Plummer has an excellent speech therapist named Kecha Lee, and she is fantastic with Terrance as she shows patience and encouragement with him. The Special Education Services at Plummer are led by Ms. Pheadra Smith, who communicates highly with Plummer families. She has a team of outstanding teachers, such as Mrs. Tiffany Lancaster and Ms. Laurine Kennedy. Plummer also partners with Turning

the Page to provide ELA/reading and mental health resources to Plummer students and their families. I have taken advantage of their free book giveaways and virtual seminars on mental health for caregivers.

Plummer has taught me that just because a school is in a troubled neighborhood doesn't mean that greatness isn't happening within the school walls. Over the years, Plummer Elementary has consistently scored the highest in Wards 7 & 8 of the district on the nationwide assessment called Classroom Scoring System (CLASS). Due to the COVID pandemic, no assessments were conducted during the 2019-2020 school year. However, in August 2022, Plummer scored #1 in all DCPS. In addition, Plummer's PARCC scores have increased by 15% this year.

In closing, being a PAVE parent leader has encouraged me to be more involved in my children's educational and social growth. I confidently suggest or request anything to ensure a successful school experience. Therefore, I am advocating on behalf of all DCPS, including Plummer elementary, that should receive increased funding for mental health support. Plummer is a beautiful rose in a concrete jungle that needs additional love and care to continue to blossom and grow.